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The Expeditionary Warfare Group of 2013

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Title: The Expeditionary Warfare Group of 2013

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Thesis: *The Navy and Marine Corps must create an Expeditionary Warfare Group that, in conjunction with an in-theater Marine Expeditionary Brigade, will function as part of a forward numbered fleet in order to fight the single battle of the littorals seamlessly from forward engagement operations through sustained operations ashore.*

Discussion: Actions in the littorals involve the close cooperation of land, sea, and, more recently, air forces and have been among the most complex of military operations. Often equally as challenging as the enemy and the environment is the resolution of the difficult question of the command and organization of the littoral expeditionary force and its relationship to the larger theater of operations. In the last century, Marines of the interwar period, focusing on the British campaign to force the Dardanelles Straits in 1915, examined the question of the command and organization of an expeditionary force and conceded the right of command to the senior navy officer without much debate.

Experience at Guadalcanal in 1942 led to a quick reassessment on the part of Marines that the commander of an Attack Force needed definite limits on his authority so as to limit unwarranted interference in land operations. This resulted in a doctrinal revision that better defined the relationship between the naval task force commander and the landing force commander as being one between equals, with the latter having unrestricted authority over the landing force once it was established ashore. As the 21st century dawns, this relationship has come under increased scrutiny as the Navy and Marine Corps shift their focus from blue water to littoral operations.

Conclusion: As the Naval Services search for conceptual and doctrinal solutions to the increasing complexity of warfare in the littorals, they must come to agreement on expeditionary warfare command, control and organization. The forward numbered fleets are appropriate commanders of the Maritime Component of a Joint Force in a contingency operation. Within that Maritime Component, two task group-level organizations—an Expeditionary Warfare Group and a Marine Expeditionary Brigade—can adequately command and prosecute portions of a maritime campaign in the littorals.

The Expeditionary Warfare Group, composed of Assault, Fires, Maneuver, and Support Units, is best structured to lead the littoral fight in the early stages of a crisis. It should be commanded by a qualified naval flag officer, and its staff should be constituted from a balanced mix of appropriately experienced Navy and Marine personnel. The Marine Expeditionary Brigade, much of which is based forward in theater as a component of the fleet, is ideally structured to assume the lead for the maritime component as a contingency progresses to a sustained operation ashore. It combines the in-theater expertise and superior C2 with a strong link to, and integration with, its parent reinforcing Marine Expeditionary Force. These complimentary, expeditionary elements of a numbered fleet will restore the synergy of the Navy-Marine team and open up the possibility of a great naval strategic stroke of the type last seen at Inchon in 1950.

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April 1, 2013: As the Petty Officer of the Watch piped his latest call over the IMC, Brigadier General William R. "Buzz" Bowen, USMC, Deputy Commander, Task Force 78, opened the hatch and walked out onto the bridge wing of the USS Bataan. Around him, the sea was as smooth as glass, and the Task Group with the Bataan at its center appeared to be steaming right into the setting sun. With a sight such as this, he could never understand how the sailors could spend their entire watches staring at scopes. Every couple of hours Bowen just had to get some fresh air - it helped clear his head. As a junior officer he expended quite a bit of energy sneaking around to satisfy this need, but now the star on each collar bought him that unquestioned right.

If he ever needed a clear head, it was now. The scopes and displays in the Bataan's CIC painted a disturbing picture. Even after years of US. Freedom of Navigation exercises, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) had evidently not gotten the message that the U.S. was serious. The waters on the west side of the Philippine archipelago appeared to be a large Chinese lake, judging by the numbers of their warships and merchantmen and the paucity of anyone else's. China's abrupt "Notice to Mariners" about its pending fleet exercise and live fire missile tests had made the desired impression. This sudden move had caught the Pacific Command off guard, coming after a year of relatively low key Chinese military activity.

Intelligence indicated a high probability that China was using the cover of a fleet exercise to plant its flag in Indonesia's Natuna Islands. That made sense to Bowen, since Borneo 's growing political split from Indonesia might be just too good of an opportunity for China to pass on, with its longstanding claims of sovereignty and increasing appetite

for oil. A bold move, certainly, but China's gradual encroachment over the Spratley Islands in the past two decades had elicited little in the way of international backlash. Members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), all with competing claims in the region, had protested loudly, and some even had minor clashes with the PRC. However, ASEAN had not developed into an effective military alliance as some had hoped. That fact, along with residual anti-colonial feelings in the region which dictated that the US remain at arms length, resulted in a serious power vacuum.

Surprisingly, the new Administration had decided that the Chinese would not be allowed to take advantage of the continuing 'federalization' of Indonesia to extend its hegemony further to the south. It quickly approached Indonesia with offers of assistance, and the Indonesians, recognizing the grave threat to the Natuna oil field, decided that they needed American help, regardless of the political cost, and shortly thereafter the Philippines came on board. Now Joint Task Force 7, built around the U.S. Seventh Fleet, was preparing to execute Operation SPRINGLOAD, and Task Force 78—the Expeditionary Warfare Group, U.S. Seventh Fleet—would likely face some interesting moments in the next few days.

II. The Naval Doctrinal Dilemma

As the 21st century dawns, what used to be known as amphibious warfare has come under increased scrutiny as the Department of the Navy has slowly shifted its focus from blue water to littoral operations. In the former, the Navy's preeminent operational unit—the numbered fleet—was designed first and foremost to defeat the Soviet naval threat, with amphibious operations in the littorals occupying an important but decidedly subsidiary place in its hierarchy. Absent a significant blue-water threat, this hierarchy

has now been turned on its head. The global land/sea interface, with three quarters of the world's population and "nearly all of the marketplaces for international trade," is now the key naval battle space of the 21st century¹.

Nearly a decade ago, the naval services signed on to what was at the time expected to be a significant recognition of this great change in naval warfare. In 1992's "...From the Sea" and 1994's "Forward ... from the Sea," the Navy Secretary and the naval service chiefs promoted a corporate vision aimed at achieving the closest operational-level integration of naval warfare within a joint campaign. However, as one author, Captain Sam Tangredi, U.S. Navy, stated in the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* in late 1999, this naval warfare integration did not occur; in fact, he opined that the Navy and the Marine Corps were further apart at decades' end than in 1992. Captain Tangredi summed up the current status of the Marine Corps-Navy relationship as follows:

The Marine Corps—through the development of operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS)—is focused on sustained operations of forces on land, but based on and supported from the sea; and the Navy appears merely to have modified its traditional blue-water naval operations so as to be practical within closer range of land. The Tomahawk attacks, carrier wing air strikes, and sanction enforcement operations that have constituted Navy operations in support of land warfare may indeed have a direct influence on events ashore, but none of these functions is fundamentally different—advances in technology aside—from those anticipated in the Cold War-era Maritime Strategy. From this view, it would appear that the Marine Corps is ahead of the Navy in optimizing its organization and doctrine to the new strategic landscape.²

Tangredi acknowledged the Navy's focus on network-centric warfare (NCW), and noted that some in the Navy consider it to be the equivalent of OMFTS. He likened NCW

...to be more a technological advancement to the data links developed for maritime engagements than a concept for maximizing firepower in the littorals.

¹ "Operational Maneuver from the Sea," *United States Marine Corps Warfighting Concepts for the 21st Century* (Concepts Division, Marine Corps Combat Development Center, Quantico, VA, 1999) I-4.

the exchange of data in support of long-range power projection and one that emphasizes ship-to-objective maneuver [STOM] leaves the impression of a gap in naval service priorities.³

In that sense, things have never really changed in the warfighting discipline known as amphibious warfare. The "gap in naval service priorities" has always been most evident at the seam between land and sea.

III. The Historical Amphibious Dilemma

Actions in the littorals involve the close cooperation of land, sea, and, more recently, air forces and have, since earliest recorded history, been among the most complex of military operations. Always present are the tyrannies of time, distance, weather, and, of course, friendly and enemy actions in multiple dimensions. Often equally as challenging as the enemy and the environment is the resolution of the difficult question of the command and organization of the littoral expeditionary force and its relationship to the larger theater of operations. In the last century, Marines of the interwar period, focusing on the British campaign to force the Dardanelles Straits and seize Constantinople, examined the question of the command and organization of an expeditionary force and conceded the right of command to the senior navy officer without much debate. The authors of the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual* (eventually *Fleet Training Publication No. 167*) favored an Attack Force organization including various naval task groups (transport, fire support, etc) and a landing force.⁴

Within a decade of the drafting of the *Manual*, Major General A.A. Vandegrift's experience at Guadalcanal in 1942 with Rear Admiral R.K. Turner led to a quick

³ Captain Sam J. Tangredi, U.S. Navy, "Who's Afraid of the NETF?," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Nov 99, p. 44.

⁴ Maj George W. Smith, Jr., USMC, *The Roots of Command and Control Conflict at Guadalcanal*. Master's Thesis (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1999), p. 7.8.

reassessment on the part of Marines that the commander of an Attack Force needed definite limits on his authority so as to limit unwarranted interference in land operations. This resulted in an on-the-fly doctrinal revision husbanded by Marine Commandant Lieutenant General Holcomb and blessed by Admirals Halsey and Nimitz that better defined the relationship between the naval task force commander and the landing force commander as being one between equals, with the latter having unrestricted authority over the landing force once it was established ashore. When the theater commander was satisfied that the weight of effort had shifted landward, he could direct the overall operational commander to shift the operational chain of command to reflect that reality.⁵ Amphibious operations in North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea featured command relations based on the idea of cooperation rather than subordination of one service to another. Although the Army had come late to amphibious doctrinal developments, its representatives were acutely conscious of their service's need not to cede a doctrinally superior position to the Navy in landing operations.⁶

During the Korean War, in order to execute the assault and seizure of the Inchon-Seoul area in September 1950 (Operation CHROMITE), General MacArthur established Joint Task Force 7 (Vice Admiral Stubble), with his subordinates as Commander, Attack Force (Rear Admiral Doyle) and Commander, Landing Force (Major General Smith). Colonel R. D. Heinl, Jr., the noted Marine Corps writer and historian, wrote that Admiral Stubble, as ComJTF-7, was busy until the eve of the operation with the theater-wide responsibilities of the Seventh Fleet, and thus nominally commanded but in effect did not greatly influence the planning or execution of CHROMITE. Major General Edward

⁵ Maj George W. Smith, Jr., USMC, *The Roots of Command and Control Conflict at Guadalcanal*.

Ammond, the X Corps commander, had no amphibious experience, and his pick-up Corps staff was by Marine standards woefully unprepared to plan a major amphibious operation. According to Heintz, the well-grounded and cooperative team of Rear Admiral Doyle (who served as R.K. Turner's Chief of Staff in World War II) and Major General Smith, each with small but competent staffs, made and executed the plan quite ably.⁷

While amphibious command relationships proved difficult on occasion, an even more troubling question was the appropriate role of a littoral expeditionary force in a larger theater operation once the landing force is established ashore. General MacArthur ruffled feathers in the fall of 1950 by retaining X Corps as a force independent of the Eighth U.S. Army after CHROMITE in operations on the east coast of Korea. In the wake of the November 1950 Chinese intervention, this independent status was revoked, and Marine formations were separated completely from the fleet and shoehorned into separate large land and air components for the remainder of the war.

While Marines bemoaned the separation of the 1st Marine Division and 1st MAF, Lieutenant General M. B. Twining, a long-service Marine, recognized that the broken fleet connection was the most critical loss. He wrote that the value of naval strength

...lies in the aggregate power and capability of the fleet as an entity, rather than in the arithmetical sum of the strength of its several components. This is plainly demonstrated by the naval history of the Korean conflict. For example, the 1st Marine Division at Inchon in September 1950 was able to accomplish a major strategic purpose in a few days. This brilliant success was due to many factors in addition to the bravery, skill, and combat discipline of the Division itself. There was the mobility of the fleet which assembled and placed it there. There was the skill of the amphibious forces in coping successfully with tides and hydrographic conditions which beggar description. There was the training and know how of the gunners of the naval fire support ships covering the exposed and tortuous approach. There was the skill and perception of the carrier pilots who covered the landing area, supported the Marines on the ground with bomb and rocket, and

combination of these elements in concert which produced, at Inchon, a strategic reaction exceeding many fold the cumulative or total capabilities possessed by each element of the fleet acting alone.

We Marines were to become aware of this only too keenly in the days which followed.... The fleet, which had performed so brilliantly in September 1950 as a balanced instrument of seapower, had been dispersed by circumstances into separate, relatively ineffective components—of land, sea, and air.⁸

After their experience in Korea, Marines fought in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf under a recognizable MAGTF structure. They also fought a protracted doctrinal struggle with the Air Force over imposition of unified air command and control in a Joint Force. In the Persian Gulf in 1991, the Marines' attempt to secure permanent control of the air battle space above the I Marine Expeditionary Force ultimately fell short of what they desired, but positive command relations and a series of expedients permitted I MEF to in effect temporarily 'manage' portions of JFACC airspace in southern Kuwait.⁹

Recent major exercises in the combined arena have opened the door to the possibility of a Marine Forces Command that, in the offensive phase of an operation, is the main effort of the Combined Force. As such, the Marine Component is designated as the Supported Commander and the others, including the Naval Component, serves as Supporting Commander. This has been exercised in war games and has been judged to be a very effective use of large Marine Forces, but it is not necessarily a valid template for the broad range of combined operations. Thus, after years of study and discussion, the new millennium finds us no closer to an answer to questions central to Marines: what is the Corps' best role afloat and ashore in a joint or combined campaign?

⁸ Col Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., USMC, *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962* (2nd Ed), (Baltimore, MD: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1991) p. 588.

⁹ LtCol L.D. Stearns, USMC, *U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf 1990-1991: The 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in Desert Shield and Desert Storm* (Wash, D.C.: History and Museums Division, HQMC, 1999) p. 142-3.

In the same way as the Marine Corps sees the deep, close, and rear battles of a Marine Expeditionary Force in a modern military operation as being a single integrated battle under a single commander, we must recognize that the battle in the littorals is best fought as a single battle. The Navy in turn must also recognize that littoral warfare is a distinct form of naval warfare, not a concept that necessitates the fitting of every conceivable element of naval, land, and air power under a single big tent. In the early 1990s, students at the Naval War College and at other military schools foresaw a Naval Expeditionary Task Force that was the equivalent of this big tent, featuring the complete integration of a carrier battle group and an amphibious ready group.¹⁰ This is not an appropriate model, because the carrier battle group, with its extraordinary speed, operational range, and tremendous power, is truly a distinct striking arm of the fleet.

Expeditionary warfare is focused on the littorals, and concepts such as OMFTS and the Marine Corps' embryonic Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare concept envision an expeditionary littoral battlefield that is a distinct subset of the joint air-sea-land operational area. With the fleet commander's theater-wide focus, it is quite likely that one component of the fleet will be working the littorals while another is positioned to lead or support deep strike operations. Fundamentally, Naval Expeditionary Warfare, like Naval Strike Warfare, is a tight subgroup of fleet operations requiring a single commander, a focused, professional staff, and an array of specialized support elements.

The Marine Corps' draft Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare concept of late 2000 is explained in terms of its Operational Imperatives and Operational Styles. Central to the

¹⁰ Col G.W. Anderson, USMC, *Beyond Mahan: A Proposal for a U.S. Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First*

concept is the impact of time in future operations, and the Corps appears to be responding to this constraint by seeking to shorten the time in which its MAGTFs can be deployed, employed, and re-tasked in theater. Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare (EMW) envisions a Marine Corps of 2020 that will be organized, trained, and equipped to provide Joint Commanders with scalable, expeditionary, forward presence, and combined arms forces. These forces will be ready to project sustainable power ashore, without reliance on host nation approval, infrastructure or support.

The draft Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare concept envisions a range of operational actions, or Operational Styles, falling into three broad conceptual areas:

Forward Engagement Operations (FEO): FEOs are conducted in support of national engagement strategies and individual CINC's Theater Engagement Plans (TEPs). The focus is on engagement to deter/preclude conflict. Examples include: Forward Presence, Joint/Combined exercises, and Show of Force.

Expeditious Decisive Operations (EDO): EDO are designed to resolve crisis situations. The focus is on timeliness of response, tailorable and scalable force, projection of relevant combat power, and ability to conduct simultaneous and sequential operations. Examples include: Humanitarian Assistance Ops, NEO, Joint, Combined, and Interagency Enabling Ops, Security Ops, Peace Ops, and Forcible Entry Ops.

Sustained Operations Ashore (SOA): SOA envisions MAGTFs employed as Operational Maneuver Elements (OME) in support of a Joint Force Commander's campaign. MAGTFs will have the ability to fight alongside Army and Allied forces in sustained Joint and Combined campaigns: Examples include: Operations CHROMITE and DESERT SHIELD/STORM.¹¹

However the capstone concept of Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare evolves before it is elevated to the status of doctrine, it is necessary for the Navy and Marine Corps to resolve the debate about the command and organization of naval expeditionary forces. As announced in ALMAR 006/01, the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC)

¹¹ "Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare" a handout (undated) from a brief by the Director, Warfighting Development and Integration Division, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA.

and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) in early 2001 reached what was described as consensus position on Amphibious Command Relationships. They agreed that

- Doctrine should not prescribe that a JFC [Joint Force Commander] normally delegate OpCon of the amphibious force to a specific Service or functional component commander.
- Command relationship options available to the establishing authority of an amphibious operation should include OpCon, TaCon, and support as described in *Joint Pub 0-2, UNAAF*.
- Commander, amphibious task force (CATF) and commander, landing force (CLF) are no longer titles, but are descriptive doctrinal terms. The terms do not imply a command relationship and are used in doctrine solely to clarify the duties and responsibilities of these commanders.

While defining an amphibious force (AF) as an amphibious task force (ATF) and a landing force (LF) together with supporting forces that are trained, organized, and equipped for amphibious operations, the consensus position was that

...While doctrine should not specify a normal command relationship, typically a support relationship is established between the two commanders based on the complementary, rather than similar nature and capabilities of the ATF and LF.¹²

This approach, while sensible in the realm of theory, is a mistake in the reality that is the day-to-day actions and minor crises response operations that characterize our forward naval activities. I propose that, within the confines of Forward Engagement Operations and Expeditionary Decisive Operations, that the numbered fleet commander be recognized as the Joint Maritime Component Commander. To execute this mission, the numbered fleet commander, in addition to the aircraft carrier battle group and other task groups standard to modern fleet operations, would have under his command a shore-based Marine Expeditionary Brigade and a sea-based Expeditionary Warfare Group. Major elements of a MEB would be based in each forward fleet area, while the remainder would be stateside but ready to deploy quickly and marry up with their MPS equipment.

The Expeditionary Warfare Group of a numbered fleet would normally consist of four subordinates: an Amphibious Squadron as the Expeditionary Maneuver Unit (EMU), a Destroyer Squadron as the Expeditionary Fires Unit (EFU), a Marine Expeditionary Unit as the Expeditionary Assault Unit (EAU), and an Expeditionary Support Unit (ESU) consisting of an Expeditionary Support Ship (LSES) with an embarked SPMAGTF (see Chart 1). As an afloat asset, the Expeditionary Support Unit would operate as part of an Expeditionary Warfare Group, but it would serve also as the transition force to facilitate the entry and initial operation of a MEB or larger force as a conflict moves from Expeditious Decisive Operations to Sustained Operations Ashore.

In a crisis scenario, the EWG would hold the ESU out to sea in readiness while the more robust EFU, EMU, and embarked EAU took position closer to the crisis area. As they are activated, MPF ships would cluster around the ESU, and the MEB offload preparation party (OPP) would transfer from the LSES to prepare the fleet MEB's equipment set for offload. The fleet MEB command element would transfer from its shore base to the LSES, and the ship's expandable C2 suite would support the MEB MPS operation until it was fully established ashore. At that point, the LSES would take up station as a dedicated air and logistics support ship, facilitating MEB operations ashore and assisting the MEB in maintaining the smallest possible footprint ashore. If the U.S. response evolved from a contingency deployment or an expeditious decisive operation (EDO) into a sustained operation ashore (SOA), the MEB's parent MEF would deploy and assume the MEB's resources and mission, either remaining as part of a Maritime Component or falling under a Marine Forces Component as dictated by the situation.

There are valid points both for and against this proposal. Those points in opposition would include recent gains made by the Marine Corps toward parity in the Joint and Combined arena in Korea and other theaters by the adoption of the Supporting/Supported Command model. Others would stress that the traditional CATF/CLF model works reasonably well and has not failed in wartime. Those in favor of the single expeditionary warfare commander concept would cite the great (and growing) dependence of the Landing Force on Amphibious Force command and control (C2), ship-to-shore movement, and logistics in FEOs and EDOs. Also, the sea occupies a primary position throughout EMW and OMFTS as a means of a MAGTF's sustainment, fires, and maneuver at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Who better to understand and exploit this critical, complex medium than a commander who has developed professionally in that medium? Finally and most importantly, in a warfighting concept such as EMW that envisions time as the key factor in military operations, time spent in reorganization and negotiation of the specifics of a supporting or supported relationship is time that could be better spent deterring or defeating an enemy. An Expeditionary Warfare Group commander supported by a well-integrated, focused staff will be a factor that multiplies the operational effectiveness of otherwise disparate components.

I propose that an Expeditionary Warfare Group should be commanded by an appropriately qualified naval flag officer, and that the group staff should consist of a balanced team of Navy and Marine officers. EWGs would generally be commanded by Rear Admirals (Upper Half), most—but not necessarily all—with meaningful "Gator" time. Marine Brigadier Generals would serve as Deputy Commanders, but an important

long-term goal for the Corps that its general officers be philosophically recognized as (1) unrestricted naval officers and (2) qualified to command EWGs. Perhaps to achieve that goal, senior field grade Marines would be required to serve 'integration' tours on amphibious ships in the same manner that Navy pilots do on the path to command at sea.

V. One Scenario: Task Force 78 in 2013

Brigadier General Bowen again considered TF 78's mission: to deter and, if necessary, defend against the Chinese seizure of the Natuna oilfield through the rapid landing and support of a force of U.S. and Indonesian Marines on Natuna and adjacent islands. TG 78 would transit the San Bernadino Strait this evening, and after breaking out of the Central Philippines it would launch a task force of eight MV-22s and a reinforced rifle company to Natuna Island. A third division of MV-22s would divert to pick up an Indonesian Marine company in route. TG 78.2, with a DDG and two DD-21s, would surge ahead through the strait in order to provide air C2 and defense, identify and track long range strike targets, and support the task force with naval surface fire support (NSFS) if required. Two attack submarines (SSNs) would also stand by in support.

TG 78.3 (ComPhibRon 11) consisting of the Bataan, the Green Bay (LPD-18) and the Ramage (DDG-61), would follow in trace of TG 78.2 and support the seizure of nearby objectives as directed. TG 78.4, the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, less its detached task force on Natuna Island, was prepared to seize nearby islands if required to protect against anti-ship missiles. TG 78.5, consisting of the USS Wake Island (LSES-1) with SPMAGTF Wake Island embarked and two MPS ships accompanying, would steam for Palawan Island in the Philippines, offload SPMAGTF Wake Island, and establish an expeditionary airfield ashore. VMFA -323 and four KC-130s were standing by on

Okinawa ready to be called forward to Palawan when the EAF was operational, and other elements of the 9th MEB were ready to deploy there on inter-theater airlift.

If all went well, China would take the hint and leave well enough alone. The U.S. would keep its "exercise" quiet in order to allow China to disengage without losing face. If not, Joint Task Force 7 would be able to match and trump China at every step up the escalatory ladder. The U.S. would now have to sustain the force in a distant region, but at least the locals had recognized the fact that U.S. military power was likely to be the only thing that would deter the Chinese. The deployment of the Expeditionary Warfare Group to the area was for now the most politically acceptable recourse, but perhaps they would see that a permanent U.S. force would be the best guarantee of their sovereignty.

General Bowen hoped for that force in short order, because the two dozen ships slated to remain in the amphibious force in accordance with the 2009 "Top Down Review" could not long sustain this "exercise." Having the USS Wake Island (LSES-1) was a godsend in terms of expeditionary support, but her large displacement, ship-length flight deck, aircraft elevators, and well deck did not hide the fact that she was a glorified motor vessel with a 250-man crew and austere self-defense, damage control, and repair facilities. Hosting a mix of twenty JSFs and helicopters, it gave the SPMAGTF an aviation capability that could serve also as an important adjunct to the MEU's ACE. Berthing more than 1500 Marines, it could tie up alongside an MPF ship and greatly expedite its offload. Only ten were being built, at a cost of the retirement of the LSD-41 class—surely a devil's bargain, Bowen thought, but way above his pay grade.

Expeditionary warfare in the littorals is a historically complex task. As the Naval Services search for conceptual and doctrinal solutions to the increasing complexity of warfare in this environment, they must come to agreement on expeditionary warfare command and control and organization. For what the Marine Corps defines as Forward Engagement Operations and Expeditious Decisive Operations, the forward numbered fleets are appropriate and capable commanders of the Maritime Component of a Joint Force. Within that Maritime Component, two of its task group-level organizations—an Expeditionary Warfare Group and a Marine Expeditionary Brigade—can adequately command and prosecute portions of a maritime campaign in a littoral region.

The Expeditionary Warfare Group, composed of Assault, Fires, Maneuver, and Support Units, is best structured to lead the littoral fight in the early stages of an unfolding crisis. It should be commanded by a qualified naval flag officer, and its staff should be constituted from a balanced mix of appropriately experienced Navy and Marine personnel. The Marine Expeditionary Brigade, much of which is based forward in theater as a component of the fleet, is ideally structured to assume the lead for the maritime component as a contingency progresses from Expeditious Decisive Operations to Sustained Operations Ashore. It combines the in-theater expertise and superior C2 with a strong link to, and integration with, its parent reinforcing Marine Expeditionary Force. These complimentary, expeditionary elements of a numbered fleet will restore the synergy of the Navy-Marine team and open up the possibility of a great naval strategic stroke of the type last seen at Inchon in 1950.

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Chart 1 – Notional Expeditionary Warfare Group

